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ABSTRACT

A study identified, explicated, and refined systematically components central to the professional competence of home economics educators. First, components that are central to the professional development of home economists were identified and proposed . Second, through the processes of conceptual analysis and dialectic interpretation, each component was explicated with respect to its merit as a goal of professional development in home economics education. The components identified in the study reflected the professional's ability to (1) be rationally committed to the mission of home economics as justifiably established by the profession; (2) reflect critically on optimum conditions for fulfilling the mission of home economics; (3) be willing to deal with complex concepts relevant to the practice of the profession; (4) have a sense of purpose that transcends self-interest; (5) identify with a community of peers; (6) participate in dialogue within the professional community through examined critique and reflection using rational standards for argumentation; (7) be self-directed in selection of experiences, opportunities, and relationships that encourage professional growth; and (8) engage in professional practice in ways that are cognitively justifiable and morally defensible.
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A CONCEPTUALIZATION OF COMPETENCE FOR THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF HOME ECONOMICS EDUCATORS

Abstract

Yvonne S. Gentzler, Ph.D.

The purpose of this study was to identify, explicate, and refine systematically components central to professional competence of home economics educators. This researcher proposed to do two things: identify and propose competencies which are central to the professional development of home economists, and, through the processes of conceptual analysis and dialectic interpretation, explicate each component with respect to its merit as a goal of professional development in home economics education.

The components of competence identified in this study reflect the professional's ability to (1) be rationally committed to the mission of home economics as justifiably established by the profession; (2) reflect critically on optimum conditions for fulfilling the mission of home economics; (3) be willing to deal with complex concepts relevant to the practice of the profession; (4) have a sense of purpose which transcends self-interest; (5) identify with community of peers; (6) participate in dialogue within the professional community through examined critique and reflection using rational standards for argumentation; (7) be self-directed in selection of experiences, opportunities, and relationships which encourage professional growth; (8) and engage in professional practice in ways which are cognitively justifiable and morally defensible.

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A CONCEPTUALIZATION OF COMPETENCE FOR THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF HOME ECONOMICS EDUCATORS

Yvonne S. Gentzler, Ph.D.

The purpose of this study was to identify and explicate components necessary for the professional development of competent home economics educators. The study arose, in part, from a belief that the values, skills, attitudes, and behaviors established in the preprofessional experience were necessary but not sufficient for meeting and fulfilling professional responsiblities. This is not to blame preprofessional programs, but to emphasize the point that professional development remains a long term lifelong process. It requires individuals to assume the responsibility, which the preprofessional experience encouraged, for their personal growth and development. Professional development is never a fixed state. It is a dynamic process whereby no one ever quite achieves complete professional competence. The process is that of "becoming."

Through observed professional interactions, this researcher noted a wide range in behaviors from less to more desirable of those believed to characterize professional persons. However, what one believes to be professional action does not necessarily constitute the values, beliefs, skills, and behaviors needed for professional competence. To accept one's current professional action accepts "what is" for what "ought to be."

One outward characteristic of any profession is the development and enforcement of a code of ethics. A code of ethics operationalizes for individual members of a profession guidelines for their professional behavior. The Home Economics Code of Ethics, first printed and distributed in the AHEA Action (1984), has not been to date thoroughly explained and defined in terms of operational definitions. Consequently, the meaning is open to diverse interpretations by members of the Association. This leaves home economists unclear and ununified as to the acceptable values, commitments and behaviors associated with or sought through the code. The code of ethics represents the combined effort by a group of professional home economists. Formulation of it resulted from analysis and dialogue. Once published, it can be debated among professionals and the emerging interpretations become the basis for further discussion of its merit. Although the Code of Ethics represents a vital aspect of the profession, it can also be viewed as the first stage of an ongoing process of professional development. The Code is relatively young in terms of its

development. As time passes its validity will be critiqued more carefully to fit the changing roles of the members it serves.

The purpose of this research was not to analyze the home economists' Code of Ethics. A partial aim was to develop components of professional competence which offer clarification of two aspects of the code. The first suggested that professionals should "Fulfill the obligation to continually upgrade and broaden professional competence" (AHEA, 1984, p. 4). The other declared, "Share professional competence with colleagues and clients to enlarge and continue development of the profession" (AHEA, 1984, p. 4). Although both principles address professional competence, neither defines or suggests what "competence" encompasses.

Various descriptions and definitions of the method to attain individual professional growth were gleaned from the related literature--none of which provided a conceptual framework suitable for the individual development of home economists. In fact, there appeared to be some controversy regarding different perceptions of professional competence. Various authors recommended and supported their beliefs concerning the process of professional development and competence. Due to the lack of a conceptual framework for professional competence, this research sought to interpret and systematically organize that which had been suggested previously by scholars, writers, experts, and other researchers.

Research Design/Method

Based on Wilson's (1963) approach to conceptual analysis, and Brown's (1980) rationale for using dialectic interpretation, the method used to justify each competency as a goal for professional development took the following form:

1. identification of component to be analyzed;
2. expansion of definition, and explication of the component's meaning; and
3. justification for the component's inclusion as a means for professionalization of home economics personnel.

Brown (1980) distinguished between two types of inquiry. One is viewed as the search for new knowledge, as evidenced by research in the pure disciplines. The other, emphasizes the organization of existing knowledge to be put to use by the members of the professions for the

benefit of their clients. In this endeavor, existing knowledge is organized to provide original solutions to problems with which the profession is concerned.

Brown's rationale was viewed by this researcher as an appropriate and desirable approach for conducting this study. In Brown's words,

> contribution to the profession in home economics education (as well as home economics and education) would be far more significant through inquiry which engages in the organization of existing knowledge than through many (perhaps most) of the efforts at producing new pieces of knowledge. The latter often are ill-conceived and reflect lack of existing knowledge (upon which the production of new knowledge depends); further, the results make no contribution to the solution of problems upon which the profession bases its purpose of existence. Problems in the profession go unsolved because they are approached piecemeal when the solution lies in the organization of knowledge across disciplines. (1980, p. 120)

Brown (1980) has underlined what leaders in the profession consistently have urged, namely, to put to use the significant findings and understandings gleaned and amassed through research and experience to date.

Consistent with Brown's admonition, this researcher proposed to do two things:

1. identify and propose competencies which are central to the professional development of home economics educators, and
2. through the processes of conceptual analysis and dialectic interpretation, explicate each component with respect to its merit as a goal in the process of professional development in home economics.

Conceptual analysis is not easily defined. Wilson (1963) used a simile to explain that conceptual analysis gives

> the impression of a tangled ball of string which has to be carefully unwound, of a great pile of different objects which have to be sorted, or of a large area of country which we have to map. (1963, p. 15)

Conceptual analysis is concerned with alternative meanings, but meaning alone is an inadequate definition of conceptual analysis. Wilson (1963) noted the following techniques be considered when employing conceptual analysis as a method of inquiry. The process is started by

isolating the concept from other related concepts. A model case is chosen and developed. Concurrently, a contrary case is chosen and developed. Both cases are related to others similar to it. The nature of the concept is elucidated if the researcher finds borderline cases, and continues elucidation by inventing cases which are outside ordinary experience. Finally, it is necessary to adopt the most sensible meaning of words, using words to their fullest advantage.

An endeavor such as this is undertaken to become more conscious through reason and order. The product of this method of inquiry is not merely an arbitrary statement of belief. However, the process must incorporate spontaneity as well as an open and reflective attitude. Openness regarding thought implies that the meaning is never closed to careful examination. It does not imply that one meaning is as relevant as another (Brown, 1980).

While conceptual analysis was chosen as a method of inquiry, this researcher also intended to employ skills of dialectic interpretation. Brown described dialectic as a mode of inquiry "concerned with the open and critical examination of the interconnectedness of ideas" (1980, p. 11). She developed this explanation by justifying the use of dialectic as a mode of inquiry into the conceptual meaning of home economics education. She claimed by employing this method, "we are using a mentally active procedure rather than an inert one of merely taking in information" (Brown, 1980, p. 11). More specifically,

> dialectic does not have a series of steps or a prescribed procedure to follow. It does not follow a formula nor does it seek to capture truth in a formula. (Brown, 1980, p. 11)

Research Results

After identifying central components of professional development, this researcher critically examined each component of competence and sought to justify the inclusion of each one as a means for the professional development of home economics educators. This examination was done by one person, as opposed to being a record of conversations or dialogue with various individuals as the term dialectic implies. However, the development of each component employs dialectic reasoning in the following respect. The examination was a result of collating ideas expressed by numerous authors. Although conversation has not taken place for the documented record, a

reasonable expectation is that the researcher selected and presented sufficient information and examples that would encourage readers to engage in their own dialectic procedures for interpretation. What is offered is not a personal viewpoint, but a reasoned attempt to present a justified account of each component of competence based on the analyses by recognized authorities and researchers.

The literature on professions was explored and no appropriate list was found of components intended to encourage professional development. Nor was any detailed explanation of components for professional development found. However, the literature revealed ethical codes of numerous professions which illustrated acceptable behavior for their members. Authors within and outside the field of home economics offered suggestions on personal abilities a professional ought to cultivate.

A list of components for professional competence was derived and interpreted from those suggestions in the literature. The complete list follows in alphabetical order: 1. Ability to communicate; 2. Ability to use practical knowledge; 3. Ability to give rational criticism of thought in an impersonal way; 4. A sense of colleagueship; 5. Altruistic motivation; 6. Autonomy; 7. Behave as a rational person and expects others to behave the same; 8. Belief in self-regulation; 9. Belief in service to the public; 10. Belief that important decisions must reflect the mature thinking of the majority rather than a small minority; 11. Capability of complex thought and ability to produce it; 12. Capacity to solve problems; 13. Capacity to remain non-judgmental; 14. Commitment to codes and standards which govern professional activities; 15. Commitment to rational and rigorous thinking, concern for the quality rather than protection of personal ego; 16. Common commitment to goals of the profession; 17. Concentration of time, energy, abilities, and professional funds on attaining and using intellectual skills necessary to achieve the values symbolized in being a professional; 18. Concern with what lies beneath the surface as opposed to the obvious and superficial (involved thinking, use of rational thought); 19. Constant monitoring of self in relation to the established norms and goals of the profession; 20. Critical reflection; 21. Desire to seek answers; 22. Development of insight; 23. Development of a professional rationale; 24. Discrimination between the relevant and irrelevant; 25. Eagerness to test soundness of thinking; 26. Freedom of thought--ability to think for self; 27. Intellectual honesty; 28. Mastery of theoretical

knowledge; 29. Openness for examination of thought; 30. Patience; 31. Personal integrity; 32. Rational and rigorous examination of different views and issues; 33. Realization that the profession operates as a part of the larger whole; 34. Realization that there are no shortcuts to intellectual respectability; 35. Realization that individuals are in constant state of becoming; 36. Respect for and defense of the behavior of persons who promote rational thought; 37. Respect for others; 38. Security within the self; 39. Self-direction; 40. The right to reasoned dissent--one is not free to think when irrationality is in control of the situation; 41. The use of reason--giving valid grounds for conclusions; 42. Willingness to examine and judge ideas by appropriate criteria according to the nature of the idea rather than by one's feelings (positive or negative) for the person who expressed the ideas.

The list, which was derived from the literature, was then shared with senior scholars in the field of home economics, including Dr. Marjorie Brown, Dr. Marjorie East, Dr. Elizabeth Ray, and Dr. Twyla Shear. The persons named served as a confirming jury. Through dialogue with each individual, this researcher refined and narrowed the list. This process was used to organize and combine the components systematically rather than to exclude any of the original list. Once the elements were categorized into similar groups, this researcher developed a statement which defined the components of each group. This effort resulted in the following list of eight disparate aims and constructs.

A professional home economist will: A. be rationally committed to the mission of home economics as justifiably established by the profession; B. reflect critically on optimum conditions for fulfilling the mission of home economics; C. be willing to deal with complex concepts relevant to the practice of the profession; D. have a sense of purpose which transcends self-interest; E. identify with community of peers; F. participate in dialogue within the professional community through examined critique and reflection; G. be self-directed in selection of experiences, opportunities, and relationships which encourage professional growth; H. and engage in professional practice in ways which are cognitively justifiable and morally defensible.

The list in its existing form may be interpreted differently, and perhaps inappropriately, by varied individuals. Employing techniques derived from conceptual analysis, this researcher chose

to develop an expanded definition and explicate the meaning and purpose of each component of competence. All of the documented information is viewed as justification for the component's inclusion as a means for professionalization of home economists.

Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations

The purpose was to organize existing knowledge of professional competence rather than search for new knowledge. Such inquiry is said to contribute to the "solution of problems upon which the profession bases its purpose of existence" (Brown, 1980, p. 120). This effort is proposed as a step within the never-ending, ever-changing process of professional competence and development. No claims are made that this work is complete or final. It represents a conceptual framework from which to view professional development. The individual components are analyzed, yet the researcher invites open critique and dialogue which encourages continued growth and development of all persons involved.

To be committed to the mission of home economics is not a quality one easily fakes. Commitment requires action based on the established goals of the profession. In other words, one acts in accordance with that which the profession aims to accomplish. Home economics seeks to help individuals and families develop their own strengths to improve the quality of their living. If one is truly committed, then he/she will concurrently exhibit an interest in optimum conditions for human health and well being. However, an interest is not enough to ensure that the goals of the profession are being addressed. It requires the professional to reflect critically on the aforementioned conditions so that he/she is qualified to deal with the complex concepts relevant to the practice of the profession. A person would have difficulty exhibiting the qualities stated above if he/she did not possess a sense of purpose which transcends self-interest. An egoist cannot be expected to help others when the main concern is self. In order for the professional to grow and develop an identity as a home economist he/she must identify with the community of peers. This is not to suggest total conformity to the ideas expressed by the community, but to participate in dialogue within that community employing techniques of examined critique and reflection. The entire process of professional development is not possible if a person waits for another to direct

his/her growth. Authentic professionals must be self-directed in the selection of experiences, opportunities, and relationships which encourage their own professional growth. To be professional finally suggests one's ability to justify one's practice as it interfaces with the larger society and profession. The goal of professional competence is that persons internalize the components and associated behaviors so they understand why they act as they do. It is not enough to know how to act appropriately. More importantly, professionals should act in ways which they justifiably believe are right in terms of the profession and themselves.

This research was conducted to propose characteristics of a competent professional home economist. It differs from quantitative research which might measure the amount of time spent in professional activities, the intellectual gain achieved by professional activities, and/or the skills accomplished by professionals. The study sought to identify conceptually how knowledge, abilities, skills, and techniques acquired in the preprofessional experience and as a practitioner, can be incorporated into the practice of a competent professional. The results can easily be transferred to various professions. Suggestions for further research follow.

1. Using the methodology of this research, define and refine the remaining components of the Home Economics Code of Ethics. Without conceptual clarity, in terms of competence, the issues and practices of professional home economics will remain elusive and at times contradictory.

2. Define and refine the meaning of each component of competence identified in this study using conceptual analysis. Seek continued meaning and appreciation of their interrelatedness and interdependence.

3. Conduct a study of similarities and differences among other professions as related to their developed components of competence. Such exchange of ideas, techniques, problems, and practices could ultimately enhance growth for all professions involved.

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